Economics Degree Pathways at Cal State LA

Business Economics | Applied Economics | Social & Behavioral Economics

Choosing a degree by career signal, skill stack, and job match

Why economics now?

Economics is a way to reason with data, incentives, markets, institutions, and human behavior.

AI raises the value of judgment

- Ask the right question before running the model
- Know what the data can and cannot prove
- Translate output into strategy, policy, and action
- Explain tradeoffs to nontechnical audiences



Core economic signal

A graduate who can combine quantitative reasoning, business context, social context, and communication is harder to automate than a single-task operator.

Analytical thinking, curiosity, resilience, and technological literacy are all future-facing capabilities.

The Cal State LA economics landscape

Three distinct pathways: one broad business degree and two BA economics options.

BSBA

Business Economics

Jack of all trades
Business + economics + quantitative reasoning

BA

Applied Economics

Specialized applied training
Finance, global, policy, data analysis

BA

Social & Behavioral

Interdisciplinary economics
Social behavior + public issues + advocacy

Formal catalog/program descriptions: BA Economics offers Applied Economics and Social & Behavioral Sciences options; the BSBA offers a Business Economics option.

Business Economics

BSBA option: the “jack of all trades” economics pathway.

BEST FOR STUDENTS WHO WANT RANGE

A business economics student can talk to finance, marketing, operations, accounting, data teams, and government stakeholders. That cross-functional range is especially useful when AI tools automate narrow tasks but employers still need judgment across business functions.

PROS

- Broad business core plus economic reasoning
- Useful for consulting, corporate strategy, and operations
- Strong “translator” degree: business problem to data question to decision



Closest job fields

Business analyst • management analyst • pricing analyst • consulting analyst • market research • government analyst

Applied Economics

BA option with finance, global, policy, and data-analysis pathways

PROS

- More specialized economics training
- Targets data analysts, policy makers, investment banks, and buy-side firms
- Pairs well with econometrics, forecasting, coding, and financial markets
- Useful for finance/global questions: risk, trade, rates, growth, markets

Closest job fields

Data analyst
Policy analyst / economic analyst
Financial analyst / investment analyst
Investment banking analyst
Buy-side research / portfolio support
International business / trade analyst

Core signal: "I can model a real-world economic or financial question and explain the result."



Closest job fields: nonprofit analyst, social research assistant, program evaluator, community economic development, public affairs, advocacy research.

Social & Behavioral Economics

BA option: advocacy through data interpretation

This option is strongest when the student wants to use economics to understand communities, institutions, inequality, public programs, and behavior. Its career value is not only “running numbers”; it is interpreting evidence so that organizations can advocate, design programs, and communicate impact.

PROS

- Human-centered economics with interdisciplinary breadth
- Great for translating data into narratives, policy briefs, and program logic
- Builds credibility for public service, nonprofit, advocacy, and community roles

Skill emphasis by pathway

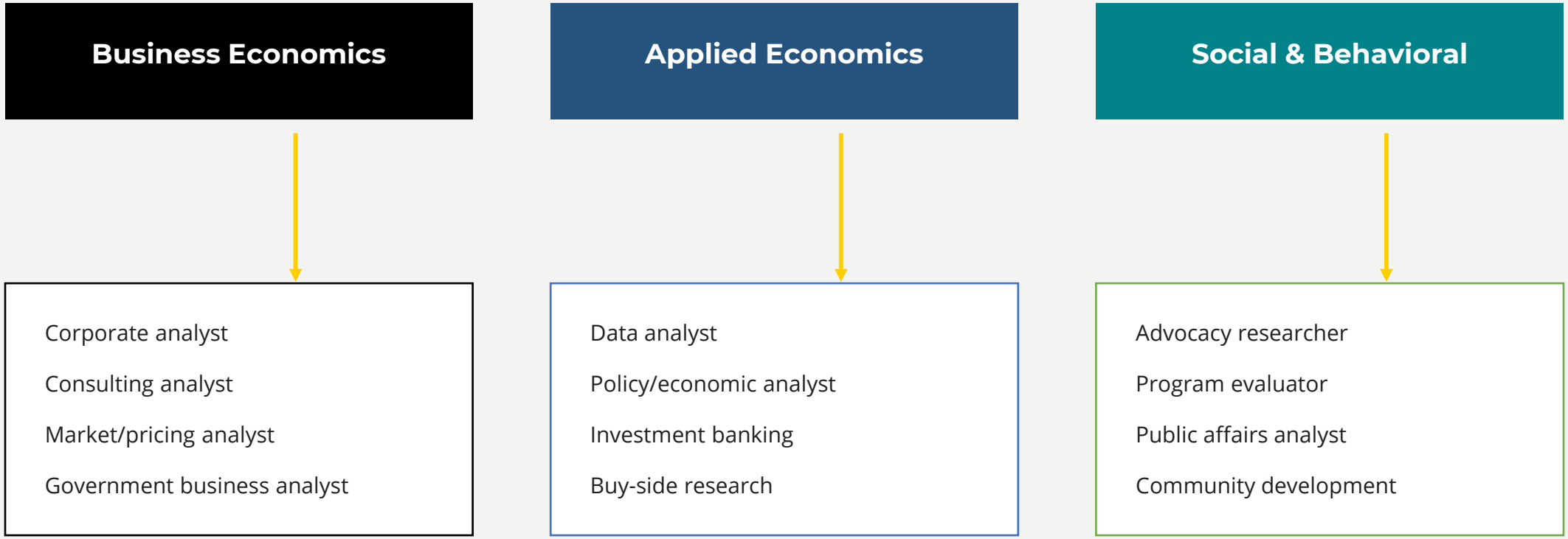
All three use economics; the differences are in context, depth, and career signaling.



Takeaway: choose the option that matches the problems you want to solve, then build a portfolio that proves your technical and communication skills.

Job-match map

Each option can reach many outcomes; these are the cleanest signals to employers.



Employer-facing language matters: name the problems you can solve, not just the courses you took.

LA-area salary signals by option

Best estimate by matching each degree option to its closest occupational targets.

Labor data is reported by occupation, not by major. These are Los Angeles-Long Beach-Anaheim annual mean wages for representative roles.

Business Economics

$86k-$113k

typical salary signal

Market research: $86k
Business ops: $101k
Management analyst: $113k

Best signal: broad business analysis, consulting, pricing, operations.

Applied Economics

$117k-$146k

typical salary signal

Financial/investment: $117k
Data scientist: $124k
Economist: $147k

Best signal: data, finance, forecasting, policy, markets.

Social & Behavioral

$79k-$92k+

typical salary signal

Human service analyst: $79k
Survey researcher: $81k
Social/community manager: $92k

Best signal: advocacy, program evaluation, public affairs, community impact.

Interpretation: Applied Economics has the highest salary upside when paired with technical/data or finance skills; Business Economics has the broadest employability; Social & Behavioral has a mission-driven public-impact signal.

Projected job growth by pathway

National BLS projections for 2024-2034; use as a directional signal for major choice.

Projected growth is occupation-specific. These are the closest labor-market matches for each degree option, not guarantees for every graduate. All-occupation benchmark: 3%.

Business Economics

Management analysts	9%
Market research analysts	7%

Applied Economics

Data scientists	34%
Financial analysts	6%
Economists	3%

Social & Behavioral

Social/community managers	6%
Human service analysts	6%

Highest growth signal

Applied Economics when paired with data science / analytics.

Most flexible signal

Business Economics because it maps to several growing analyst occupations.

Strong impact signal

Social & Behavioral through social-service management, evaluation, and advocacy research.

Build an AI-resilient economics portfolio

Regardless of option, students should graduate with evidence that they can turn messy questions into credible analysis.

1. Technical fluency

Excel/Sheets, SQL, Python or R, visualization, basic AI prompting for analysis.

2. Economic reasoning

Causal logic, opportunity cost, incentives, markets, policy tradeoffs, forecasting.

3. Communication

Briefs, decks, dashboards, memos, stakeholder translation, recommendations.

4. Domain signal

Finance/global markets, public policy, business operations, or social impact.

Sample project: “Use public data to model a Los Angeles economic question, visualize it, and write a recommendation.”

How to choose the best fit

Start with the work you want to do, then pick the option that gives the clearest signal.

Do you want the broadest business signal?

Choose Business Economics. It is the strongest “jack of all trades” option.

Do you want technical analysis for finance, policy, or global markets?

Choose Applied Economics. Pair it with econometrics and data tools.

Do you want to use evidence for advocacy, programs, and social impact?

Choose Social & Behavioral. Build briefs, evaluation reports, and data stories.

Advising prompt

“What roles do I want to be competitive for in 12-24 months, and what projects will prove that fit?”

Bring that answer to the CBE Advisement Center and to economics faculty conversations.

Sources & next steps

Program pages

Cal State LA Department of Economics and Statistics - Undergraduate Programs

Cal State LA University Catalog - BA Economics and BSBA Business Economics descriptions

Career references

BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook: Economists

BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook: Financial Analysts

BLS OEWS: Los Angeles-Long Beach-Anaheim May 2023 wage estimates

BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook: 2024-2034 employment projections

BLS/O*NET: Management Analysts; Financial and Investment Analysts

World Economic Forum: Future of Jobs Report 2025 - Skills Outlook

Next: visit CBE Advisement, review the current catalog/roadmap, and align electives with your target role.